Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Success Stories

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Mass in Motion ©

MASS IN MOTION SPRINGFIELD

> "It's not always easy to get projects like this off the ground here. But with the positive outcomes we're seeing — community engagement, safer streets, improved attendance, kids arriving ready to learn — we'll be able to influence more schools, parents, and teachers."
>
> **NICOLE BOURDON**
> MASS IN MOTION COORDINATOR
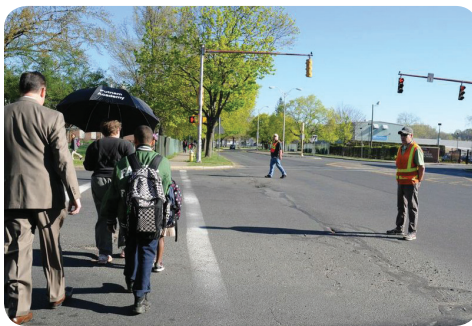
Springfield Schools, Parents, and Children get on board the Walking School Bus

SUMMARY

Walking to school helps children be active before school and better prepares them to learn once the school day begins. In many communities, there are children who face safety barriers walking to school. For these children, taking the bus or being driven are the only safe options, even when they live close to school. In 2012 Springfield's Brightwood Elementary School received the *James L. Oberstar Safe Routes to School Award* for its daily **"Walking School Bus,"** which provides a safe, active, and fun way for children to walk together to and from school.

CHALLENGE

In Springfield, more than 90 percent of students who lived within a mile radius of school were being driven to school. Stranger danger, traffic safety, and time were the three main concerns for parents when it came to making decisions about whether to let their children walk to school. Parents can be the most sustainable partners in walking school bus programs, but parents in Springfield needed to be convinced. Schools also play a major role in the success of walking school bus programs, but if teachers and staff are not on board, it can be difficult to sustain the effort.

SOLUTION

Together, Mass in Motion Springfield and the **Springfield Safe Routes to School Alliance** gave presentations to school staff and parents to get initial buy-in. Karen Pohlman of the Baystate Brightwood Health Center educated parents and staff on the benefits of the program and the importance of their involvement. Incentives were offered to teachers to help sustain the program once it started. Brightwood teachers began meeting students outside their homes and walking them to school. "We help them cross the street, we talk about what we're going to do that day in school," says teacher Mary Montori. Springfield police officers and state troopers also got involved to show students, parents and staff that they are there to help keep kids safe.

PARTNERS

Springfield Safe Routes to School Alliance, Springfield Public Schools, Mass in Motion, Live Well Springfield, Springfield Housing Authority, the Talk/Read/Succeed program, Baystate Health Safe Kids program, Brightwood Health Center and the YMCA of Greater Springfield.

CONTACT

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RESULTS

At the beginning of the 2010 school year, the **Walking School Bus** started with six to 10 children walking every morning with a small but consistent group of teachers. By the end of the first year, 50 students were participating. In the 2011-12 school year, Springfield had three separate walking routes led by staff, Monday through Friday, with about 134 students consistently walking to school each day.

Not only is participation through the roof, but attendance has also improved for these students at school.

Seven schools have signed on for similar Safe Routes efforts, including Brightwood. However, only Brightwood has a functioning Walking School Bus. The remaining five schools are in the early phases of thinking about how to get kids to be more active, and a few plan to start a Walking School Bus next year. In addition, two of these schools have already conducted walk audits with WalkBoston to see what areas need to be improved and what routes may be safest for walking.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Mass in Motion Springfield will continue to work with 32 additional schools with a goal of signing up five new schools each year. They also have plans to use school BMI data and test scores to track student's overall weight and school performance.